MODERATOR'S CONFERENCE ON RACIAL JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

Charlotte, North Carolina
June 6-7, 1997

Opening Worship - Matthews Murkland Presbyterian Church
John M. Buchanan
June 6, 1997

Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-21

St. Paul had a big vision.

The longer he lived, the more of human life he saw, the more mature and wise he became, the more he pondered the basic compelling power of the cross of Jesus Christ, the more Paul talked about unity, reconciliation as the basic Gospel message ... and the bigger and broader his vision became.

He certainly knew a lot about the opposite – about the divisions and subdivisions of the human race into tribes, races, nations and religions. He enters the stage of history, after all, as a zealous persecutor of Christians, in the name of the religion, customs, mores and culture of his own people.

He certainly experienced a world divided by nationality and race as he walked the roads of the ancient Roman Empire.

But foremost in his mind, and claiming the best of his heart and soul, was a division between his own personal identity as a Jew, a child of the covenant, a son of Abraham and Sarah, a Pharisee, one of God's chosen – and his identity as a new person in Jesus Christ, part of what he increasingly understood was God's new humanity, God's new creation.

What precipitates the conflict and claimed so much of his attention was the simple fact that outsiders, Gentiles, had responded to the preaching of the Gospel, his preaching, in fact. And the more he preached it and the more they believed it, the less important the older religion and customs and racial identity seemed to be. Circumcision is what did it. Gentile converts to Christianity – Greek-speaking Gentiles in Ephesus and Galatia and Philippi were not eager, for obvious reasons, about submitting to the rite of circumcision.

And so, Paul wrestled with it and the more he did, the more he thought about the incredible assertion that he heard himself proclaiming with such confidence every day – that God's love for the world, the whole creation, became clear and alive in the life of Jesus Christ that that man's death on the cross somehow was the forgiving of human sin, the healing of human enmity, the binding up of human suffering and the reconciliation between God and humankind ... the more he

pondered that, the bigger and more universal and cosmic it became and the smaller and less important the division between Jews and Gentiles became.

Before he was done, Paul had come to believe that God's purpose, in Jesus Christ, was not simply the saving of a few thousand Jewish souls for eternity, but the redemption of the whole created order. "God was in Christ," he said, reconciling the world to God's self. It was a plan "before the ages;" a plan to "unite all things in Christ."

This is breathtaking theology. This is not a limited edition invitation to paradise for a select few. This is the action of God to bring about a new creation, a new humanity, a new human history.

And you know who was to show it to the world? You know who was to demonstrate that new creation, that new humanity – which transcends tribe and clan and race and religion? It's none other than the church.

No wonder we don't like Paul. Listen to Paul long enough and you're jerked out of your provincialism; jerked out of the disputes and arguments that constitute the institutional church's favorite activity, jerked out of the comfortable structures of nation and tribe and class and gender and race – which you think constitutes your identity – and given a whole new vision, a whole new identity.

"But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." Ephesians 2:13, 14

No wonder we're not sure we like Paul. Right out the window goes a lot of what we thought was important, our old identity, and in its place is a bracing, challenging, wonderful new vision.

"You are no longer strangers and aliens but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God." Ephesians 2:19

For more than 30 years, the Presbyterian Church has been engaged in the struggle for racial justice. There are here this evening brothers and sisters whose call to faith came as part of that great crusade. There are here tonight men and women who had given up on the church, given up on organized religion, who had to take a second look when Ken Neigh marched and Eugene Carson Blake got arrested and a young idealistic preacher in Cleveland laid down his life, and, having taken that second look, have never been more in love with our church than when it stood for racial justice and against racial violence and institutional, systemic and individual racism.

Some thought the battle was over. Some became distracted, preoccupied. African-American sisters and brothers tried to tell us but we didn't listen. Instead we listened to the Wall Street Journal which apparently cannot and will not abide a church which dares to be Reformed and Pauline in its theology. Instead we have been silent as America turned its back on its urban underclass. We have been silent as America has made it more difficult to access healthcare,

education, housing and jobs and along the way, began, slowly but surely, to back away from and dismantle political structures designed to level the playing field.

And then came the fires. No, they weren't a result of a grand conspiracy. No, they weren't all the result of a virulent racism. This one apparently wasn't. But their sheer number, their sequence, their statistical focus constitute the starkest of evidence that racism is not dead, that African-American churches – the very heart and soul of an oppressed people – became the intentional and specific target for deep and continuing racism.

We are here in the name of Jesus Christ. We are here because one of ours, Matthews Murkland, was a part of that eruption of ugliness and sin. We are here because in Jesus Christ God has ushered in a new creation in which there is no place for this sort of thing.

We are here because in the cross of Christ the walls of hostility have been broken down and we are one in Christ.

We are here because we believe that Paul's glorious vision of a new humanity in Jesus Christ is truth, essential, final, compelling and beautiful truth.

We are here because Jesus Christ is our peace.

* * * * *

May our being here together be a reminder of who we have been as a church, and who we must be in the future.

May our being here mark a renewal of that commitment to justice and peace and reconciliation.

And our affirmation that we are – together – each of us and all of us, children in the household of God.

MODERATOR'S CONFERENCE ON RACIAL JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

Charlotte, North Carolina
June 6-7, 1997

"What the Church Can Do"
June 7, 1997
John M. Buchanan, Moderator

Opening Comments

The inspiration for this conference came at a meeting on a hot July afternoon last summer in the Matthews Murkland Presbyterian Church. At the table were several elders and members of the Matthews Murkland Presbyterian Church, their pastor, Larry Hill, James Thomas, the Associate Executive Presbyter of Charlotte Presbytery, and from the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk, Curtis Kearns, Director, National Ministries Division, Pamela Worthy, Administrative Assistant in the National Ministries Division, and the new Moderator – me.

We had come to Matthews Murkland Presbyterian Church as the first stop on a trip to visit several of the churches which had been recently destroyed as part of a striking and very disturbing pattern of church burnings, mostly African-American, not exclusively, but predominantly, in the South. The purpose was to see, to witness first-hand what had happened, to talk to people and pastors and to convey something of the concern of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and our continuing commitment to the cause of racial justice and the continuing struggle against the systemic racism which had reappeared dramatically and violently on several occasions in recent years.

We came to Matthews Murkland because it was one of ours. We knew that the Matthews Murkland building was not the structure the congregation was currently using but an older building – the former site of the congregation's worship and life, a building which, by the way, was quite lovely and for the people who live here – of all races – a gracious landmark, a symbol of racial diversity and for many, a symbol of the progress we have made in this country in reaching for a goal which is very precious to us – a racially inclusive church in a racially inclusive culture.

At the meeting, Cliff, Curtis and I conveyed our concern to the officers and pastor – just a few weeks after the building had been burned down. The charred timbers were still on the site outside. And we listened as they told us about the old building – what it meant to their community: the baptisms and weddings and funerals which had made the space sacred. They told us what it felt like to be a racial ethnic congregation whose church building was torched – as part of some larger, insidious pattern of burnings – even though it was becoming clear that no overall conspiracy or collaborative effort would be revealed – and, in fact, the person who was the chief suspect was a minor with no connection to racist organizations or causes.

What the people told me and what Larry said impressed me. Larry Hill said, "Something good is going to come of this. God did not do this to us, but we believe in a God who can make something good out of evil." Yes, I thought, that is exactly what we believe. We Christians who make our way every Lent to the cross stand beneath the cross in silence before the stark evil of it all, stand in awe before the sovereign gracious purposes of a God who can and will somehow transform even this and bring life everlasting, victorious life, out of this death. So even though audible "amens" are not part of the ordinary liturgy of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, I said, "Amen" and Cliff and Curtis and Larry and I covenanted that we would try to see what the Spirit was leading us to do so that the good purposes of God might, even here, show something of the power and hope of resurrection to the world and maybe just as important, to our church.

I know that there was no evil strategy, no one organization that planned, targeted, and implemented these acts of violence. And I know a number of churches burn down every year for a wide variety of reasons. So what? I also know that The Wall Street Journal's greatest phobia apparently continues to be that the prophetic voice of the church might somehow address an authentic moral deficit in American culture, a phobia shared by powerful, wealthy and influential organizations that get nervous and then indignant when someone has the audacity to suggest that racism is a reality, that acknowledging, confronting and challenging racism is part of the mission of God's people, God's church. I know the pain of the Journal and its ideological partners that Christian people and church have actually given money not only to rebuild the church – praise God for that – but to address the reality of racism – the pathology in the culture (and of course, we're not the only culture, and of course, every racial group is perfectly capable of developing its own form of racism) – the pathology which attracts the rage, hostility, prejudice and the emotional torment of sick men and women and children and suggests that an effective way to express it is to go buy a can of gasoline and in the middle of the night, burn down the Little Zion Baptist Church outside of Boligee, Alabama or the beautiful building on Old Providence Road that belongs to the Matthews Murkland Presbyterian Church. I know that the fact that churches actually, intentionally and creatively and generously see the combating of racism as part of what God calls them to do, and expects them to do, is a source of great discomfort to many. So what?"

Three weeks ago Sue and I were in Washington, D.C. with the gift of an unusually empty morning. We decided to visit the U.S. Holocaust Museum. We had visited the Yad Vashem Memorial and Museum in Jerusalem two years ago and had experienced the full impact of that reminder of the power and evil of racism. We were perhaps more reflective in the U.S. Holocaust Museum. It takes three hours. You enter an elevator, which, as the doors close, you realize is a replica of the gas chambers. In your hand is the passport and picture of a person – a middle-aged man for me – who died at Auschwitz. For three hours we looked at pictures, records, exhibits, film documenting the terrible, undeniable reality, that what happened to six million Jews was the result of political madness and evil, well-organized and planned and carried out by one of history's true monsters – but also the terrible, undeniable reality of the culpability of millions and millions of other human beings – many of these Christians: Germans, Poles, Hungarians, Americans – who somehow found a way to look the other way or discount what has happened or deny responsibility. It is an exercise in systemic racism.

And just a month earlier we were in Osijek, Croatia, visiting separate refugee camps for Muslims driven out by the Serbs and Croats persecuted by the Serbs and the Bosnians, and Bosnians targeted by Serbs and Croats and Serbs pushed back by Croats and Bosnians. And everyone we talked to knew who was at fault and whose traitorous, treacherous history was the reason and whose culture's racial characteristics were responsible. Croats know it's the Serbs. Serbs know it's the Croats, but particularly, the Bosnians. Bosnians know it's the Serbs and Croats. Orthodox blame the Muslims. Catholics blame the Orthodox. Systemic racism. Nobody intends it, apparently.

In the preface to his book, Race Matters, Cornel West writes about at rip to Manhattan from Princeton, to have his photograph taken for the cover of his new book. He had lectured that day and had related Plato's powerful description of Socrates' visit to Piraeus, the multi-cultural center of Greek commerce – and W. E. DuBois' pronouncement that "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." Plato and W. E. DuBois. West told his students that the fundamental challenge of his life was "to speak the truth to power in love so that the quality of everyday life for ordinary people is enhanced and white supremacy is stripped of its authority and legitimacy."

And then, in Manhattan, he dropped off his wife, who had an appointment, parked his car, and stood on the corner of 60th Street and Park Avenue in the rain, to call a cab. Ten taxis refused to stop. Ugly memories of other events flooded his mind – being stopped three times in his first ten days in Princeton for driving too slowly.

West reflects on the reality and power and destructiveness of racism – to all of us and recalls Ralph Ellison's memorable description in the 1970s that related racism to white America's continuing identity crisis. "We're not really sure," Ellison said, "of who we are – but we know who we're not. You get to be an insider by identifying someone to be an outsider." "Perhaps that is why," Ellison speculated, "one of the first words many European immigrants learned when they got off the boat was the term 'nigger' – it made them feel instantly American." (p.1)

What can the church do?

Well, for one thing, name it. For starters, call it what it is. Stop pretending it doesn't exist. Stop that most unseemly of all behaviors – i.e., telling people who are victims of racism – that it doesn't exist.

You don't have to conclude that all police are racist – or even most police – to know and say that when two white Chicago cops pick up two African-American teenage boys and dump them out of the squad car deep in a white neighborhood known for its racial hostility and the two youngsters are subsequently beaten nearly to death by a gang of whites – that racism continues to have a certain violent and systemic reality among us.

Martin Niermoller was right after all. He didn't object when they hauled away the Jews, Gypsies, mentally handicapped, Catholics, homosexuals – and when they came after him, it was too late: there was no one left to object.

Pat Brown wrote recently: "Congregations must be immediately and publicly vocal in response to acts of racial violence whether they are on national news or down the street. Silence is acceptance. Nonchalance supports the problems and complicates the solution."

What can we do? Well, be here together, for starters.

Name it – acknowledge that the battle is not won – the struggle continues.
And then, each of us, our congregations, minimally, can reach out to one another in a way we started to do 30 years ago, but have largely stopped. We can reach out across racial/ethnic lines and talk and pray and worship and sing and break bread together.

We can say, simply, that we need one another for our affirmation of the goodness of God's creation to have integrity. We, quite simply, need one another for our praise of God to be whole.

This church of ours has always believed that the words we speak, our public gestures, matter.

So may we speak and act in a way that says again that this Presbyterian Church of ours will not tolerate racial violence, will not be silent in the face of racial violence, will not avert our eyes from the reality of racism, will never, ever give up the dream which we believe with everything in us is God's dream, God's plan, God's eternal will, of a human family living in justice and peace and harmony and joy and love.

* * * * *

Again, thank you for your presence and may God give us the creativity and courage to be faithful witnesses and brave advocates, and the grace to stand together as children of God and therefore, brothers and sisters.